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ABSTRACT

The four narratives presented in this paper represent the classroom triumphs and tribulations of four beginning minority teachers. The vignettes are part of a larger case study investigating the specific socialization experiences of these new teachers, graduates of the Peabody College (Tennessee) Internship/Induction Program, an alternative post-baccalaureate teacher preparation program. The first story, told by Kathy, a first grade teacher, describes a student who learned something about self-reliance; next, Hector, a junior high school science teacher, tells about an incident that should not have happened, and reflects on his own commitment to keeping students in school and responsible for their actions; the third story, told by Sonya, offers insights into her year-long struggle with a troubled teen who sought to maintain some modicum of control over his life through school behavior; and finally, Yvette details a young girl's move toward becoming a more confident, eager learner. The vignettes reflect each teacher's philosophy, values, and beliefs; depict examples of those things that are important to them; and provide food for personal reflection and frameworks for future direction. (LL)

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Vignettes From the Field:
Stories From Four New Minority Teachers

Introduction

"Everyone should teach for at least a year so that everybody could see what teachers have to go through." This quotation is from Kathy, one of the minority teachers profiled in my recent study of new minority teachers. Her story (see Elbaz, 1991) and those of her colleagues are intriguing and unique narratives about their triumphs and tribulations during an important year of significant professional and personal growth--their first year in the classroom as full time teachers. These four teachers are unique because they made conscious decisions to enter the teaching profession during a time when fewer and fewer minorities are choosing careers in teaching (Office of Minorities in Higher Education, 1991).

Why is this significant? In order for all children to form healthy perceptions of themselves and others, it is crucial that our public schools have qualified minority teachers on their faculties. So often, teachers are the first and sometimes only positive role models students see, and this is particularly true for minority students. A related issue is the importance of positive interaction between minority teachers and white students. Sonja (one of the teachers in my study who teaches at a large, predominantly white, suburban high school) told me, "Other than their maids, we [she and her black colleagues] are the only black people some of these kids see." Graham (1987) substantiates the importance of this exposure by emphasizing how important it is for white children to interact with blacks and other minorities. Leonard, Kapel,

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and Williams (1988) further point out that minority teachers promote interracial acceptance and understanding in predominantly white schools.

Background

The four vignettes that follow are part of a larger case study investigation of the specific socialization experiences of these new teachers who are graduates of Peabody College's Internship/Induction Program, an alternative post-baccalaureate teacher preparation program. The purpose of that study was to chronicle the changes in perspectives these teachers underwent after their induction year through their second year of teaching; how these changes affected their feelings of success and future plans; and what contextual factors were responsible for those changes. These teachers were defining their roles as teachers for the first time without the constraints of mentor teachers, supervisors, or college faculty. Sharing their stories can inform not only preservice teachers and other new teachers but also teacher education programs and the general public. Also, telling how they have managed the dynamics of teaching during their second year of teaching [their first full year] is important for current discussions about new teachers, teaching, socialization, and teacher education programs. Finally, because these teachers are young minority teachers, their voices are particularly important. Minority teachers make up slightly more than 10% of the teachers in public schools. By the year 2000, researchers predict that the number of minority teachers will decline to less than 7% as the number of minority students continues to rise (Graham, 1987). Thus, these teachers are role models. Their message is, "Some young intelligent minorities do still choose teaching as a profession."

The Vignettes

The four compelling vignettes presented here specifically detail trying and triumphant moments or humorous and awkward situations the teachers experienced. For all of them, the situations resulted in indelible lessons learned in the field.

Kathy is a 1991 graduate of UCLA with a degree in psychology who taught first grade during her induction year and currently teaches fourth grade in suburban Maryland. She tells the story of Carolyn who learned "How to fish."

Gone Fishing

As a first-year teacher, my year has been filled with countless "memorable" moments. My diary is abundant with horror stories ranging from classroom dead time to pinata parties gone wild as well as with triumphant and joyful episodes like the light of understanding clicking on after explaining a math concept for the umpteenth time. One account that took place this year has stayed in my mind and probably will for some time. It's a story I like to tell.

Lunchtime is wonderful! It rescues my whining students from the monster of starvation (we have the last lunch period); and, it provides their equally famished/in-need-of-a-break teacher with 20 minutes of solitude. Despite how taxing the morning hours have been, we all seem to find peace and pacification as we journey to the lunchroom. And despite how much I couldn't wait for my lunch break, the first semester involved a daily ritual/appointment: Carolyn, the juice bag, and me!

Carolyn is one of my brightest third graders. She has such a genuine thirst for learning. She truly does bring joy to my days as well as keeps me on my toes. As independent as she is in the classroom, the first few minutes of lunch always required assistance from me to help her open her juice bag. I'll admit, I feel that an aluminum bag of juice isn't the best idea, especially for little hands. It's inevitable that the child will squeeze the bag too hard while puncturing the microscopic straw hole and "juice bag" winds up "juice on the table." Each day she'd say in a sing-song voice, "Ms. Ayers . . .," and with the look of desperation in her eyes, no more needed to be said. That was my signal.

Realizing that I was on the road to spending a full year trekking to the

lunch room to open Carolyn's juice bag, I decided it was time for her to learn this task for herself. "OK Carolyn," I said as I strutted her to the lunch table, "have you ever heard this saying before, 'If you give a man a fish, he'll eat for a day; if you teach a man to fish, he'll eat for a lifetime?'"

"No," she replied.

"Do you understand what it means?"

"I don't know."

By this time I decided to cut through the chase. I explained, "The point is, you're going to learn to do this yourself . . . today." Together, her little hands in mine, we fumbled and squeezed and spilled. After wrestling with the bag, I admitted defeat to myself and decided to live with my new job title: teacher/juice bag opener. She tried; she failed; she just wasn't ready.

The next day I followed my kids into the lunchroom as usual and stopped to chat with someone along the way. Upon reaching my final destination, Carolyn, I saw her sitting with a perfectly punctured juice bag in her hands. As I looked at her in amazement, she smiled and simply said, "I taught myself how to fish." From that day, my assistance has never been required again.

I'm not sure why Carolyn's success and prolific statement touched me the way it did--maybe because it represented the necessary determination that I'm convinced will carry her through life; maybe because it showed me that as a teacher I <u>can</u> be the "guide on the side," as opposed to the so-called "leader"; maybe because it reassured my beliefs that some of life's best learning experiences can happen outside the classroom. For whatever reason, it always makes me feel good to know that Carolyn "taught herself to fish." That's one thing she learned while in Ms. Ayers' third grade. Perhaps she's learned some other things too!

Hector is a former marine biologist and graduate of the University of Washington who taught junior high science in Nashville. Hector describes the endless roles teachers must play as his walking field trip turned into much more.

<u>The Incidental Field Trip</u>

In my first year of teaching I have endeavored to make science interactive, locally relevant, and full of surprises. By varying my methods of

presentation, I accommodate different learning styles and maintain a high interest level--a critical element with the inner-city students I am teaching. Well, on one rather chilly Friday in late February, science became a highly interactive and locally relevant experience!

We were studying geology, in particular the erosive capabilities of running water. I had planned a walking field trip to nearby Richland Creek to supplement the hands-on stream table experiments we were running in class as I often take advantage of any nearby learning opportunities. Due to the possibility of bad weather, I had not announced it to the class on the previous day because I did not want my students to be disappointed if the trip were not possible. But as fate would have it, we were able to take the quarter of a mile hike to the Creek. As we surveyed the features of the creek and compared them to what we had seen in the text, we noticed a pair of legs visible beneath the freeway bridge a short distance upstream.

"It's Jimmy!" shouted my excited students.

They were referring to a student who had not come to school that day. Knowing him as a class clown who had set a cheerleader's pom-poms afire only a week earlier, I had no reason to doubt them. I put my student teacher in charge, and I decided to surprise him by quickly overtaking him under the freeway bridge 200 yards upstream. Running is not very easily accomplished on muddy river banks in wing-tips and a tie, but I had the jump on "them" (explained later), until I came to the drainage ditch hidden in the willows! The ditch was wide, easily 3 feet deep, and too wide to jump. A partly collapsed section of highway fence hung above the water and was obviously the route of choice for the neighborhood boys, so across it I went figuring that if they could do it, so could I. The "moat" had served its purpose well; the "keeper of the castle" had escaped from under the bridge and into the back of a shopping center on the other side of the freeway.

I stopped for a moment to survey my next move. As I scanned the concrete, I noticed a large culvert that opened beneath the parking lot. Suddenly, a teen face peered from within. As I started to run, not one but three of our students darted from their refuge and disappeared into the mall. I had a class to teach and having recognized the three truants, back to school I jogged.

It was easy for me to imagine the sinking feelings of the boys beneath the bridge as they witnessed my impromptu field trip on the day they had picked to skip. You see, they knew exactly what our assistant principal would do as soon as I reported my "chase." Mrs. Cypart promptly called the boys'

parents and related my story. I am sure that the walk back home was a long and melancholy one for our "skippers" on this frosty morning.

Back at school, I was surprised; the students were actually rooting for me. Apparently those students who had dutifully shown up for school were resentful of the "skippers." To my further surprise, the students who had been caught held no grudge towards me. They were in fact impressed that a teacher had made it though the obstacle course so quickly and felt as though they had been caught fair and square. The added notoriety among their peers seemed a sufficient consolation.

This showed me that any lesson plan can often yield unexpected results, particularly when 14-year-olds are involved. I had not started out that morning to become "the-teacher-who-chased-skippers-down-the-creek-bank-to-the-mall." But, such is life in the daily routine of us teachers!!

Sonja is a 1991 graduate of Memphis State University with a degree in English who taught junior high language arts during her induction year and currently teaches high school English in Memphis.

"Hanging Out" at The Mall

"Out!" I forcefully instructed the young man.

"What a great start," I thought to myself. I had ordered a student from my classroom on the first day of school.

The first day had gone well until that point. I was nervous but determined make a positive start. During my internship as a graduate student, I decided I wanted to work in an inner city school where I would be needed. I dreamed of reaching out to street-wise youths. I dreamed of being someone they could trust. However, my dream seemed to have faded away.

At the beginning of the school year, I found myself working in one of the most reputable counties in the state. I was offered a position in what was said to be the nicest school in the district. I accepted. Hillcrest High School is beautiful, but nothing close to the one in my dreams. This school is located in a very wealthy homogeneous community. Most of the students are well fed and well dressed, and the building itself is idealistically architected with large bay windows and wide stairwells. This is how the school received its nickname from those outside the area--I began my first year of teaching at "The Mall." I felt some guilt in accepting an assignment in a school located

so far from the inner city, but the contract was signed. I came to the teaching profession to work with those who wanted to escape poverty; instead, I found myself in suburbia. I felt like a traitor. I feared not being wanted or needed, and my fears were seemingly becoming reality.

Until the last class of the day, everything had gone well that first day. Despite my apprehensions, I tried to be positive. As the day wore on, I felt more and more relaxed because each class seemed attentive and responsive. Though I had anticipated some challenges because of my age and my petite stature, I found that my sophomores respected my authority. But, as fate would have it, there was one exception.

The final hour came, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I was thinking of how well the day had gone as my last class filed in. They seemed to be a little more anxious than the earlier groups, but this was to be expected since this was the last class of the day. Then, about 5 minutes into the period, Joe glided through the doorway. Giving no excuse for his tardiness, he promptly informed me that he was an eleventh grader. He had taken sophomore English in summer school, and his schedule would be corrected the following day. I allowed him to take a seat in an effort to keep class flowing smoothly. Joe had other ideas.

He sat near his friends and began a conversation that lasted several minutes. My requests for their attention were short-lived, and Joe seemed to be annoyed that I was disturbing his discussion. He ignored my glares of disapproval and became louder and more disruptive. It was obvious that he feared no consequences for his behavior; after all, he was "an eleventh grader." I grew more and more upset, fearing I might lose control of the entire class. No longer able to tolerate Joe's disrespect, I firmly asked him to leave. "What?" he responded. "Out," I repeated. I then told him that he made it obvious that he was not a member of my class and asked him to wait in the guidance office until they found a place for him. Joe left, and I regained control. The day came to an end, and the feelings I enjoyed just an hour earlier had disappeared. I was upset with myself because I had almost lost control on the very first day. I chastised myself and promised myself that I would do better on the next day. I was at least grateful that my school year would be "Joeless."

The second day came, and my students were receptive once again. I counted the hours and wondered how my final class would receive me. They entered the class and to my surprise, Joe was among them. He had not passed summer school and was mine for the year. He made it apparent that he was as happy to be there as I was to see him. While his behavior was not as disturbing as the day before, it was far below my expectations of appropriate

classroom conduct. Following the bell, I rushed to the telephone and called his mother and explained the situation. She said she would talk with her son. Over time, Joe gradually improved; however, the tension between us remained, and I was uncomfortable in addressing him. He had a chip on his shoulder, and I did not want to knock it off, for he had the potential to become explosive.

As the weeks went by, I began to gain an understanding of Joe. I learned that many of his teachers saw him as a troublemaker, and he deserved the reputation. I was also told by the administration that he was "the kind of kid that didn't deserve a break." He was not unfamiliar with the criminal justice system and had been suspended from school countless times. It was also common knowledge that Joe, who was barely 17, used "non-narcotics" on a regular basis.

As tough as he was, Joe would sometimes come to class bruised or wearing a black eye. He had an older brother who had a reputation for being quite brutal, and the two fought often. Joe usually lost. I slowly saw that his world was not glamorous. I could relate to the control (of which his world was so void) that he so desperately needed. As my understanding grew, so did my desire to become his ally. I had several conferences with him, and he realized we had common goals. For the third time, Joe was failing English. He had the potential but rebelled at anyone or anything that tried to control him. I tried to help him see that passing my class would give him more control over his future.

Together we developed exercises to help him manage his temper when he became frustrated. His outbursts diminished, and his interaction with others improved. Eventually, Joe took on positive leadership roles in the classroom, and his grades improved. He became intensely concerned with his performance and worked to excel.

Towards the end of the year, Joe handed me a prom picture so that I would not forget him--as if I could. Though we began as threats to one another, we became friends. He respected my authority, and I respected his needs. I realized that he did not really want to control my class--he wanted some control in his life. Joe is one step closer to just that. Not only did he pass sophomore English after three attempts, he honed some skills that will help him throughout life.

Joe was not the only one that learned a worthwhile lesson in class this year. His teacher learned that teachers can be instrumental wherever students abound. Though in my heart and mind, I still believe there is a dire need for teachers willing to work in the "trenches" of the inner city, I no longer feel

the need to apologize for my roles as teacher and learner at The Mall.

Yvette is a 1989 graduate of Hampton University with a degree in marketing. She left a position with a major insurance company in Connecticut and now teaches first grade in an urban elementary school in Maryland.

Antoinette's Walk

As I reflect about this past school year, I cannot help but wonder about the progress that my students made from the moment they entered in September through the day they left "my nest" in June. Although I realize that they truly made leaps and bounds, those leaps and bounds are not clearly evident on a day-to-day basis. The uneasiness I feel about their development will quickly be put to rest when the fresh new recruits arrive in September, and it is apparent that we have a lot of work ahead of us to reach that magical point in June 1994.

As the new school year approaches and I engage in conversations with friends about what I will be teaching, I am greeted with mixed emotions. Most people have empathy for me because I am a teacher, but then it goes deeper once they find out that I teach the little people (i.e., first graders). Some respond with questions about patience and others are curious about teaching these little ones to read, write, add, and everything else we are faced with today. Usually these types of discussions put me into deep thought with questions to myself about how I actually do get my students to read and write and add and, of curse, do "everything else."

Some first graders come to school with a world of background knowledge and will more easily adapt to new things they are taught. Others who have not had as much exposure will be in a very early readiness stage and will need time to just simply explore what a book is all about. Then there are students in which it will be difficult to know what their previous experience is because they simply are not comfortable talking in a classroom setting. This was the case with Antoinette.

Antoinette was a very small first grader with a very quiet voice. She was extremely reluctant to participate in activities, including games. I always made attempts to encourage participation, but her response would very quietly be "I don't want to play." As the year went on, Antoinette participated more and more, although not as much as I hoped. She had shown tremendous progress. Then Antoinette went through a phase where once again she was not interested in participating. I would often worry about her and wonder if I was

giving her enough attention, making her feel comfortable within our classroom, and making sure she had the opportunity to let her strengths shine in front of her classmates. Antoinette would occasionally surprise me by volunteering to come to the front of the class and read from a chart. Other times I could barely get her to answer a question. However, Antoinette left the best surprise for me during the last few days of school.

As I was taking care of the morning ritual--attendance, lunch count, announcements--Antoinette was at the book center looking at a book, and she continuously called my name. This was unlike the quiet Antoinette I knew. I asked her to wait one minute, but she was simply bursting with excitement. I put down my papers and walked to the center. Antoinette opened up a book entitled Rosie's Walk and proceeded to read the entire book. Now this may seem a simple task for a first grader in June, but Antoinette had clearly taken a giant leap forward by sharing. I was extremely proud of her, and she was definitely proud of herself as she was grinning from ear to ear and doing everything possible to keep from jumping up and down. I leaned over and gave her a big hug and thanked her for sharing as she proceeded to read Rosie's Walk again. Clearly, Antoinette had just taken an important step in her own walk.

Summary

Bullough (1989) suggests that studies of first-year teachers help new teachers to understand better their experiences, to make their first years easier, and to discover the pathway that leads to greater personal and professional competence. Certainly, these teachers communicated all of those insights both in the larger study and specifically through their stories. At once, these stories reflect these teachers' philosophies, values, and beliefs, depict examples of those things that are important to them, and provide food for personal reflection and frameworks for future directions.

Sonja's saga of her year-long struggle with Joe gives readers an insight into the life of a troubled teen who sought to maintain some modicum of control over his life through his behavior in school. Sonja had no previous experience with dealing with such an angry young man; however, she maintained her composure, sought advice

from teachers who had taught Joe, and used her own intuition, memory, and desire to help this young man through this difficult time. She could have handled him differently, but she wanted to prove to herself that she could help him and maintain her pleasant and structured classroom.

Yvette's story also spans the course of a year and details young Antoinette's move toward a more confident, social, and eager learner. Yvette would have liked to have had more stories like Antoinette's; however, most of her students did not end the year where she had hoped. Antoinette was an example of the kind of learner Yvette wanted to inspire--one who wanted to share what she had learned. Her progress gave Yvette the kind of boost she needed as the year ended. She left the episode knowing that the joy and pride Antoinette felt and her own sense of accomplishment could be duplicated during the 1993-1994 school year.

Hector's story about a single incident that should not have happened reflects his commitment to keeping students responsible for their actions and to keeping students in school. He did not chase them to identify them for punishment back at school; he wanted to take them back to school because they needed to be there learning something that would edify them. This incident relates to Hector's comments about the problems poor attendance causes for the school but more importantly for the students themselves. The students (such as the young men Hector caught) who need to be in school all the time are usually the ones who come too infrequently. They could not see that they are cheating themselves, not their teachers.

Kathy told the story of Carolyn who learned something about self-reliance.

Kathy seemed initially frustrated first with Carolyn's parents for giving their child such a difficult-to-open snack bag and with Carolyn's failure to open the bag without spilling the juice in spite of Kathy's constant modeling and instructing. She saw it as one more item on the list of things to do for her kids. As the time passed, Kathy grew to accept it as part of her lunch routine. Nevertheless, she endeavored to help Carolyn learn to do it herself. That day of discovery finally came when Kathy's patience and Carolyn's determination paid off and Carolyn learned "how to fish." This story is a good illustration of Kathy's doing outside of the classroom what she taught inside the classroom--teaching her kids to be more independent. She made the comment to me in one of our final interviews that although she was a bit melancholy with the fact that her kids did not seem to need her as much as they did at the beginning of the year, she was very happy that they were becoming more independent and self-reliant. Thus, Carolyn's triumph with the juice bag was also a success story for Kathy.

In sum, these stories provide snapshots into the classrooms and lives of these teachers. It is not surprising that all of the stories are about interactions with students as good teachers are in the profession because they enjoy interacting with, guiding, and nurturing young people. These teachers' commitments to helping students succeed, the satisfaction they get from their students' successes, and the frustrations they feel when students fall short all come shining through in their stories.

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